ANTIDOTE FOR ANXIETY
Luke 12:22-31
November 17, 1968
Rev. John H. Buchanan

From the late Albert Camus, to Norman Vincent Peale, to Charlie Brown's protagonist - Lucy, anyone who is someone in the literary world has had something to say about this matter of "anxiety". Camus, a brilliant French novelist who was killed in an automobile accident, designated this as the "century of fear", and devoted much of his writing to documenting and probing into the depths of that ambiguous fear.

Norman Vincent Peale, likewise, has correctly assessed this as an age of uncertainty, - an age of anxiety, and has profited royally, simply by attempting to deal with the issue, however superficially.

And Lucy - Lucy operates a 5¢ psychiatric clinic from which she dispenses counsel and advice to the anxiety ridden characters of Peanuts. On one occasion she correctly diagnosed Charlie Brown's dilemma as "Pantophobia" - fear of everything. In a moment of integrity he acknowledged that that really was his problem - he was afraid of nothing in particular and everything in general. That is - he was anxious.

Franklin D. Roosevelt spoke to the soul of a nation and also diagnosed a prevailing anxiety when he said: "We have nothing to fear but fear itself."

Anxiety is one of the definitive characterstics of life in the twentieth century. And while it is certainly not a new phenomenon there is much about living at this time that makes anxiety more intense, more acute - and more dangerous.

I would like to make three observations about anxiety: it is not abnormal: all men experience it: it can be a creative factor in human behavior. Like other human emotions anxiety exists on two levels - individually, but also corporately. Like other human emotions, corporate or communal is magnified in intensity and therefore becomes a very important factor in the affairs of men. Rollo May, a leading psychologist and professor at Columbia has noted the clear relationship between anxiety and the way men behave politically.
"... we wish to note," he wrote "that (Fascism) is born and gains its power in periods of widespread anxiety." (p.9, The Meaning of Anxiety, New York, 1950)

And Paul Tillich, perhaps the finest philosophic theologian of this century, discussing the situation in Europe during the 1930's as he experienced it - "First of all a feeling of fear or, more exactly, of indefinite anxiety was prevailing. Not only the economic and political, but also the cultural and religious, security seemed to be lost. There was nothing on which one could build, everything was without foundation. A catastrophic break-down was expected every moment. Consequently a longing for security was growing in everybody. A freedom that leads to fear and anxiety has lost its value; better authority with security than freedom with fear." (p. 245, The Protestant Era, Chicago, 1947)

Severe anxiety motivates men to do strange things; politically to give up their freedom in the search for security. That is how, I am sure, history will explain the bizarre phenomenon of 10 million Americans voting for George Wallace and Curtis LeMay in 1968. Anxiety is the answer, a nation deeply anxious about a nagging, impossible war, inexplicable turmoil in cities and on college campusses and the overturning of everything that is safe and sure and traditional.

Individually severe anxiety can cause us to seek the security of withdrawal- or shyness: it can make us become overly aggressive: it can cause us to lash out irrationally at those we love - or merely stand around sighing and wringing our hands a lot. It can cause people to seek refuge in alcohol - LSD - or even television.

Unfocussed anxiety can be so all-encompassing that our lives become a singular obsession with its resolution.

Anxiety is a potent and real force today, corporately and individually. But what is it exactly? Books have been written defining it, and it is a bit presumptuous to over-simplify; but Webster says anxiety is "painful uneasiness of mind over an impending ill." For our purpose today I'd like to deepen that definition to include the observable, unfocussed fear that is part of the unknow - the future of being human.

Jesus talked about anxiety, in a very basic and forthright manner. Fortunately he did not become involved in confusing semantics - a gift rarely matched by anyone today. He presented his case rather simply..."do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat, nor about your body, what you shall put on. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than birds.." and later.."... do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be of anxious mind. For all the nations of the world seek these things; and your father knows that you need them. Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things shall be yours as well."

Like many other favorite passages, lifted out of the Bible, we have problems with this one - basically a misunderstanding based on a misleading translation. And before we begin to use the content of the New Testament as an antidote for anxiety it would be fitting to know what it doesn't say.

You and I were weaned on the King James translation which reads: "Take no thought for your life, what you shall eat, etc. " That, frankly, is an interpretation - and the Greek won't bear up under it. The R S V translates, "do not be anxious." Today's English Version - "Do not worry." There is, obviously, quite a difference between not being anxious or not worrying - and taking no thought whatever about your life. Jesus did not teach that there is religious merit to nakedness or starvation. There is within Christianity a strong tendency toward asceticism - i.e. a rejection, or at least a suspicion of the material, real world. It is perhaps best seen in the monastic movement in the middle ages. It is based on the unbiblical assumption that a hungry, poor man is intrinsically holier than a wealthy, well fed man. It was expanded to include the celibate man or woman - thus driving a deep wedge between the spiritual and the physical. But Jesus didn't teach it. The thrust here is on anxiety - worry - not on the simplistic act of preparing for the future.

The image of birds here - a beautifully poetic illustration - has been grossly misused also. Consider the birds - millions of them starve to death. In fact, their entire existence is a continual struggle for survival. This text has been used to justify idleness - living off the fat of the land. But a bird is anything but idle. Its days are filled with nest building and food hunting: it migrates hundreds of miles because it is concerned with tomorrow. God provides for the birds - but a lazy, idle bird will die.

The point is that Jesus was not teaching irresponsibility: he was not advising against any plan for tomorrow: he certainly was not recommending idleness, or parasitic living off the wealth of others.

He was talking about freedom - freedom from man's all-encompassing anxiety about security. He was talking about atimeless characteristic of the human organism that quickly becomes an obsession. He was talking about man's deepest anxieties, and his concern that this anxiety - this incessant worrying about the future actually prohibits a man from freely and fully living his life.

I know people like that. I know people so terribly busy assuring their security in retirement that they don't have time to live in the present. In fact, sometimes the Church is like that.

It's not a new phenomenon to be sure, and yet anxiety about financial security is so structured into the American Way of Life that it has become the chief end of man. Everything depends on it: everything is geared toward it.

Erich Fromm has written: "Throughout the whole process of education, in the family and from Kindergarten through college, the individual is made to feel that the meaning of his life is bound up with something that can be destroyed by a mere change of fashion or a bit of bad luck."

CBS, several years ago, did a documentary film of American youth entitled "16 in Webster Groves." That project put to rest many of the stereotyped images adults have of teen-agers. We are inclined, today, particularly to see young people as political and social radicals, idealists who want to change the world, revolutionaries who refuse to take the system seriously. But in the film person after person after person - all 16 - came before the camera to say that their goals in life were a good salary - a split level home - and two automobiles; and furthermore that these goals were so important they would do anything to achieve them.

That is the result of anxiety: that is the fruit of a sick society, obsessed with security - ready to sacrifice anything for the nirvana of a fat retirement check.

We ought at times to thank God for the Hippies, for those brave souls who call us back from the edge of idolatry - for those - however offensively - who are trying to teach us that life is more than food, more than clothing, more than anxiety.

Christmas is upon us: turn your radio on today and you will be made to feel that you're not really with it unless you spend a small fortune on those you love: and you will be told that the finance company is ready to assist you in acheiving what you really want - a feeling of satisfaction and security. And in December more suicides will be committed than in any other month of the year. It is no coincidence. Life is more than food and clothing - anxieties are not relieved by buying more - but many discover that too late.

You and I experience a lot of anxiety: we are concerned about our mortgages, our health, our position in the community: we worry a lot = about debts, college for the children and retirement, perhaps grades on an examination. We won't ever stop being concerned about these things, and if we did we would be irresponsible. But we don't have to be obsessed by them. Our concerns don't have to prevent us from living full and happy lives.

We can be helped, I believe, by the insight that all anxiety is related: that we worry about financial security because deep below the surface we are anxious about ultimate security. That's what the philosophers mean when they talk about "angst" or dread. Paul Tillich identified man's fundamental fear - the fear which gives birth to all anxiety - as the fear of non-being. Death is its ultimate expression. But non-being, Tillich taught, also meant meaninglessness, a sense of not mattering: a feeling that I don't count, my life adds up to a big fat nothing.

That's our real anxiety - and to combat it we furiously pursue financial security. Material wealth is a way of saying "I count". It is a way of denying my own mortality.

But it doesn't work. Because life is more than that.

God's word for us, from this text, is - I believe - profoundly simple. It is this - there is no ultimate security in anything we can buy or achieve. God is the only ultimate security: he provides for us - now and forever. We run the risk of missing the best in life when we are anxious about the future: he has made us for more than that.

The Antidote for Anxiety? - Jesus Christ. What he taught - but supremely himself. For he came to be the love of God. He came to act out the love of God for us. He came to show that the future is secure - that all things will be added to us.

The Christian life, the life with which we are concerned here, is one of joyful abandon, a life of freedom from anxiety - a blessed life of trust in God. May it be so for us. Amen.